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THE DRAMATIC MODE. LITERATURE CURRICULUM V, TEACHER VERSION.

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DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN THE NARRATIVE AND DRAMATIC MODES CAN BEST BE UNDERSTOOD BY EMPHASIZING WHAT IT MEANS TO THINK AND CREATE DRAMATICALLY. ALTHOUGH BOOKS (WHICH ARE READ) AND PLAYS (WHICH ARE SEEN) TREAT PLOT, CHARACTER, AND SETTING SIMILARLY, CONVENTIONS THAT PARTICULARLY DISTINGUISH THEATRICAL FORM ARE--(1) THE AUTHENTICATING REALITY OF THE ACTOR'S PHYSICAL PRESENCE AND FIRST PERSON POINT OF VIEW, (2) THE PUBLIC INTERACTION OF PLAYWRIGHT, ACTORS, AND AUDIENCE, (3) AUDIENCE PERSPECTIVE, (4) DRAMATIC TIME, AND (5) SUCH DRAMATIC CONVENTIONS AS THE DISGUISE OR MASK, THE SUSTAINED MOTIF OF EITHER PHYSICAL OR PSYCHOLOGICAL COMBAT, THE PHYSICAL CONVENTIONS OF SET AND COSTUME, EXPOSITION AND DESCRIPTION THROUGH DIALOGUE, AND SUCH STRUCTURAL DEVICES AS THE CURTAIN. THE GENRES OF TRAGEDY AND COMEDY CAN BEST BE DISTINGUISHED FROM EACH OTHER BY THEIR INTENTION. THE TRAGIC PLOT IS CHARACTERIZED PRIMARILY BY THE PROTAGONIST'S INCREASING ISOLATION FROM SOCIETY, WHEREAS IN THE COMIC PLOT THE PROTAGONIST IS INCREASINGLY INTEGRATED WITH SOCIETY OR A NEW SOCIETY IS CREATED TO ACCOMMODATE HIS GOALS. IN THE DRAMATIC TREATMENT OF THE CONFLICT OF IDEAS, SHAW AND IBSEN HAVE CREATED AN AMALGAM OF THE REALISTIC AND ROMANTIC, OF THE REAL AND THE SYMBOLIC, WHICH HAS PROFOUNDLY AFFECTED THE MODERN THEATRE. SEE ALSO ED 010 129 THROUGH ED 010 160, ED 010 803 THROUGH ED 010 832, TE 000 195 THROUGH TE 000 220, AND TE 000 227 THROUGH TE 000 249. (JB)

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# LITERATURE CURRICULUM V

## THE DRAMATIC MODE

### 1. Book and Play, Print and the Voice

Considering the relationship between Epic, or Narrative, and Tragedy, Aristotle at one point in the Poetics remarks that "from one point of view, Sophocles is an imitator of the same kind as Homer"; and the use in both Drama and Novel of the ingredients of Plot, Character, and Setting may at times make the distinction between these Modes seem almost artificial. Furthermore, the popularity of the printed play from the sixteenth century to the present* suggests that many readers have been able imaginatively to supply enough of the missing elements of theatrical production to make play-reading a pleasant extension of the novel-reading habit. The playwright has cooperated, of course, by adapting the convention of the stage direction, ostensibly provided for director and actor, to the needs of the reading audience, until at times in Shaw the direction becomes in a strange way an aside to the reader spoken by an omniscient novelist.

Book and play are nevertheless different--as different as the easy chair at home and the assigned seat in the darkened theater, as different as the word in print and the word shaped by the human voice. The classroom experience of a play, however, will in most instances be primarily a reading experience rather than a theatrical one; and hence it will be important in presenting this mode to place the strongest possible emphasis upon theater, upon what it means to think and create dramatically.

### 2. Thinking Dramatically

Aristotle makes the most obvious distinction between the Narrative and Dramatic Modes, saying that the poet "may imitate [represent] by narration. . . or he may present all his characters as living and moving before us" (italics supplied). He also finds a psychological foundation for the pleasure of "representing," proposing that there is "an instinct of imitation . . . implanted in men from childhood" and that the delight man takes in viewing "things imitated" is also universal. It is here that we may begin.

Central, most certainly, to the "complex delight" of theater is the continuous sense we have of physical presence, the tangible reality of the actor there on the stage before us, the actor whose art immediately with the rise of the curtain provides the authenticating element that the novelist must bend all his cunning with words alone to secure. Of all the illusions deliberately cultivated by the various kinds of artists, that created by the dramatic collaboration of actor and playwright is surely

*Ibsen's plays were generally in print before they reached the stage, and the 8000 copies of his A Doll's House were sold in one month.

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the most powerful, among other things often concealing, while we are in the theater, improbabilities of which we may later become aware --"in the cooler tribunal of the study," to use Sheridan's phrase from his Preface to the printed edition of The Rivals. At the same time, however, the knowledge that we are in a theater watching actors at work after the long preparation of rehearsal easily coexists (the complexity of the delight) with our happy illusion that it is all read and is happening for the first time before our very eyes. As this double pleasure becomes more conscious (which is to say better informed) it comes to resemble other kinds of aesthetic enjoyment, which for the sophisticated is based upon some knowledge of the craft and discipline of the art before us (this is why we try to "teach" literature and the other arts). Acting too has its conventions which the great actor coerces to his own creative purposes.

There is another very simple and yet very important aspect of Drama that sets it, the Art of the Theater, apart from Narrative, the Art of the Book. The experience of Narrative in our time (the family tradition of reading aloud has died, like little Nell, pathetically) is a private and silent communion between reader and author or reader and character, whereas the experience of Drama (we may here include the experience of Film) is public and inescapably social--still a "festival" if you please, a formal communion of playwright, acting troupe, and audience. Reading is solitary, theater we enjoy in the company of our fellows, sometimes hundreds of them, sharing with them quite spontaneously our laughter and our tears. The communal experience of theater gives what otherwise would be a purely "literary" experience an extra dimension of pleasure that is as real as it is difficult to define. It may be added that although the communion is now secular in nature, the continuing circumstance of the audience (congregation) is a reminder of the religious origins of both the Greek drama and ours.

Basic to everything else, then, is the dramatist's presentation of "all his characters as living and moving before us."

## 3. Thinking Dramatically: Point of View, Dramatic Time, and Audience Perspective

### A. Point of View

We have in all our attempts to deal with the point-of-view problem tried to distinguish between the technical and common ("what's your point of view on this?") usages of the term. In any discussion of Narrative the technical distinctions are clear: first-person-singular, omniscient author, "middle ground," each with its variations. It is also clear that the novelist is allowed a technical choice--must make a technical decision--in the matter of point of view that will be profoundly related to his subject and intention and will have the most crucial consequences for the execution of his work and the response of the reader to the finished product. This particular choice is not allowed the playwright. The Dramatic Mode by its very nature vetoes the omniscient author convention and the middle-ground compromise, so that

the playwright's relationship with us must be effected entirely through the medium of the troupe of actors on the stage. Drama is all first-person singular--or first-persons-singular--and the voices are embodied, as in life, are made one with constant physical movement.

B. Dramatic Time

Constant physical movement--the word is important because in spite of the convention of the intermission, the ruling circumstance of the theater allows no real interruption, the audience is denied the liberty of putting the book down at any moment. This makes possible that building up to grand climaxes, comic as well as tragic, an effect aided and abetted by the theater's peculiar and inescapable grammatical tense, the continuous present. The ruling tense of Narrative is the Past (there are of course some exceptions, as in the stream-of-consciousness Novel or Story). Even though dialogue in Narrative may be felt as present, "he said" and "she said" are recurrent reminders that the talk being presented has already entered into history, the issue having been decided, and all alternatives to the fatal conclusion have been closed. Indeed, perhaps the chief effect of the continuous present in the theater is the sense we have that the plot alternatives have not been foreclosed, an illusion that explains the naive viewer's impulse to call out warnings to the hero or heroine on the stage.

C. Audience Perspective

The circumstance of the theater, finally, provides an obvious physical meaning for point-of-view that the term cannot have in the art of Narrative: the location of the audience in relation to the action on the stage. From the second half of the seventeenth century until comparatively recently the proscenium stage, which prescribes an audience arranged in a rectangle of rows before it, has been the prevailing physical feature of the theater, with footlights and picture frame creating a certain separation of audience from action. The return in the newer theaters of our time to approximations of the Globe situation (Shakespeare's "theater in the round") has in part been justified as a means of securing a more intimate relationship between audience and actor, which may be thought of as a point-of-view shift from "in front of" to something approximating "within." This may seem a significantly appropriate development; for the dramatic art was probably from the first designed to create a more intense, continuous, and perhaps ultimately more wearing audience empathy than any of the other representational arts.

4. Dramatic Conventions

Our working definition of convention may as well be the convenient dictionary one: "an established usage growing out of tacit agreement or custom." The "tacit agreement" in the arts is a pact between audience and artist, of which the first unwritten clause demands that no embarrassing questions are to be raised about conventional usages--except

of course by the great original dramatists themselves. Take the "fourth wall" convention of the box set of the modern "realistic" play: it is of course ridiculous (what bomb ripped away that brick wall so neatly, and what kind of hallucination makes the tenants go on behaving as though nothing had happened?), forcing among other things certain strange patterns of furniture arrangement--all chairs and settees headed front, as in an airplane; but it works, custom stifles questions, the illusion and attendant empathy are secure.

Most if not all conventions are not fixed but subject to change. Their chief function is to facilitate discourse between artist and audience in particular places at particular times. In drama, the conventions can be thought of as the terms, the language, in which dramatic thinking is conducted and becomes embodied. Such are our basic assumptions.

A. Physical Conventions: Set, Costume, etc.

We have just referred to the box set of the modern realistic play, which Ibsen and his followers seemed to make the ruling convention of modern stage production. Early in this century, however, dramatic thinking led to a revolt against realistic thinking (a revolt not confined to theater) which resulted in new stage usages. They may be crudely summarized as a change from the literalist representationalism so well characterized by some of Ibsen's set descriptions to theatrical symbolism, from the box set crowded with furniture to a stage startlingly austere, bare except for a few objects (steps, platform levels, perhaps a single tower or monolith, etc.) that convey the mood and inner meaning of the play. The curtain has gone. The stage is unpromisingly bare under flat lighting as you arrive in the theater. It will come to vibrant life later, as the light changes and the actors come on. It is to be emphasized that the extreme flexibility, the symbolic possibilities, and the great power of illusion of this kind of stage would not have been possible without the radical advances made in our century in the technology of lighting. Modern electricity thus has been one of the determinants of our theatrical revolution. Historical contexts determine many artistic conventions.

For instance it was to be expected that in an historically-minded age like ours, attempts at accurate reconstructions of production circumstances of past ages would be made. Thus the bare stage of our many Globe replicas, a development for which we must be grateful, not least for the way in which it has helped to shift the emphasis and attention from the architecture of Gothic battlements to the meaning and the music of the verse. Costume "historicism" was a parallel development, so that it is now conventional to clothe Julius Caesar in the toga and Macbeth in the Highland military kilt, as of course they were not clothed in the theater of Shakespeare or that of David Garrick. Interestingly enough, the "modern-dress" Shakespeare of our time (representing really another kind of historical thinking) is probably closer in spirit to the earlier costume conventions.

B. The Combat

"Combat"--we need the strongest possible word for the conflict that is perhaps the central plot motif of all drama. Combat, contest --the words associate themselves with Roman arena and modern prize ring and suggest that gladiatorial combat and game have a family relationship with dramatic forms. It would seem that the most compelling feature of all public spectacle is the fight, and perhaps the chief clue to the psychological participation called audience empathy is the combat emotion. Conflict is of course present in narrative plot (of our novels in this year's curriculum it is perhaps least "dramatic" in The Scarlet Letter), but it is doubtful that the novelist ever feels it necessary to sustain the conflict motif through his work; his techniques are quieter, reflecting the situation of the reader in his easy chair, and he has other, non-dramatic, concerns.

It is worth noting that of our five plays the combat is made physical only in Macbeth. The great conflicts of ideas and passions given the verbal form of violent argument (Oedipus) and debate (Ghosts and Major Barbara) can be really so much more compelling and terrible.

C. The Disguise

The Disguise or Mask is a convention that functions both in comedy (Portia as Bellario, Captain Absolute as Ensign Beverley) and tragedy (Macbeth as righteous avenger for Duncan's murder); and, although many novel plots seem to turn upon the mask of deception (Arthur Dimmesdale, Jay Gatsby), the disguise convention seems to enjoy a special rightness in the world of the theater, since the art of role-playing is its distinguishing feature. It is a complex delight indeed to watch the actor playing Absolute playing Beverley.

The mask of the Greek theater, then, remains a central symbol of the theatrical art and stands for one of the most persistent of plot conventions. It is the theatrical aspect of the endless variations played upon the appearance-reality theme in all literary Modes (Odysseus as Noman). Even in the King Oedipus the end of the tragic action is the unmasking of the (unconscious) masker.

D. Plot and Character Conventions

The disguise device can be thought of as a convention either of plot or of character; perhaps primarily of plot in comedy, of character in tragedy. The masquerades of Portia in The Merchant of Venice and of Captain Absolute are purely plot expedients, neither growing out of or having any deep consequences for the character of the masker; whereas the role-playing of a Macbeth is inseparable from what the tragic character has profoundly willed himself to be.

There are plot types and character types, with of course significant differences between the "types" of tragedy and comedy. The "Teacher Version" discussion of the form of The Rivals usefully proposes that basic to the tragic plot is the isolation of the hero from society, whereas something like the opposite is true of comedy, which "consists in the

integration of the protagonist with society (or the creation of a new society in accord with the protagonist's goals)".

The proper names of the characters of The Rivals point to a comic character convention of ancient origins: the character stands for or is ruled by a single passion or characteristic, and is always "flat" because although he holds our interest he can be trusted never to go against the grain of his type: thus Lydia Languish, Mrs. Malaprop, Sir Anthony Absolute, Sir Lucius O'Trigger. The list could be indefinitely expanded --Braggart Warrior, Irate Father, Talkative Woman, Rustic Squire, etc., the type in different ages of course varying according to the social terms, the manners, of the times. Add the Plotter--Plotter within the Plot. Captain Absolute is one, Sir Andrew Undershaft an exciting variation on the type. "If I go to see you tomorrow in your Salvation Shelter, will you come the day after to see me in my cannon works?" Sir Andrew says to Barbara at the end of the first act, and when Barbara accepts the challenge the plot structure of the rest of the play is determined.

Tragic protagonists may have their origin in "types," but in them the type is usually so submerged in the complex "roundness" of the conception that it is not very useful to think about them in this way. Macbeth is a Plotter, but so much else besides!

E. Exposition

The "Form" section of the "Teacher Version" of Ghosts provides a short discussion of Dramatic Exposition, which may be briefly defined as dialogue so written as to furnish the audience with information about "what has gone before" necessary for complete understanding of the present-tense unfolding of the dramatic narrative proper. Exposition is most clearly forced upon the playwright when he turns away from traditional stories with which the audience is familiar in favor of the completely invented plot, and the first problem of Dramatic Exposition is how to give it plausible motivation. In the first act of The Rivals Sheridan disposes of the problem in the classical manner: two servants, old friends for some time separated, filling each other in on the news about their respective households--"But tell us, Mr. Fag, how does young master?" The variations that can be played upon this simple question have proved to be nearly infinite (Sheridan himself pokes fun at the device in his comedy about bad plays, The Critic).

Ibsen is a master of the realistic handling of the convention. In his plays, Exposition is always plausibly motivated, always dramatic, and always fused naturally with the great themes of the plays. Note how he handles it in the extended dialogue between Manders and Mrs. Alving that brings Act One of Ghosts to an end. Manders begins it with an almost formal flourish: "Let me refresh your memory, Mrs. Alving" --what a bold stroke this simple statement is. "Let me refresh your memory, Mrs. Alving, and let me also in the process provide the audience with a number of facts they need to have before them." The motive is the return of Oswald and those opinions of his that have so shocked Manders in the preceding dialogue. Manders, then, will "refresh" Mrs. Alving's memory in order to try to make her see that all her life she has "been quite disastrously selfish and stubborn. . . headstrong and

undisciplined," and that she is now responsible for her son's evil ideas. The Exposition is dramatic because it takes the form of a cruel indictment; and the dramatic emotion intensifies as Mrs. Alving marshals her defense, adding facts about the past that Manders has been ignorant of, filling us in further, while at the same time turning Exposition into Combat. It builds swiftly and relentlessly to the first-act curtain: Manders, who has begun it in ignorant self-righteousness, momentarily brought low (discovery with reversal)--"How shall I ever have the face to give my speech tomorrow. . . ?" And then immediately the sexual struggle off-stage, and "Ghosts! those two in the conservatory. . . come back to haunt us". And the Exposition just ended is perfectly fused with the central theme of the play.

As the curtain falls.

F. "Curtain": Act and Scene Conventions

The Elizabethan five-act convention had respectable classical origins, but it does not seem to operate as a very important structural principle in the plays of Shakespeare and is not even honored consistently in the First Folio printing of the plays. Their actual thematic and plot development seems again and again to ignore these divisions, the rhythm of scene variation appearing to be more important. In the developing practice of the proscenium theater, the number of acts in the new plays decreased from five to four to three, as if in recognition of the importance of reducing such interruptions; but the curtain did operate to some extent, as the end of a chapter or episode does in a serialized novel, establishing a convention called by its name, a climactic speech or gesture or tableau that brings the curtain down. Shaw and Ibsen, both great craftsmen, quite clearly accepted the act as providing a convenient structural principle in their dramatic thinking, and their "curtains" will repay study as another aspect of "thinking dramatically."

G. The Unities

Any review of dramatic conventions that omitted all reference to the Unities of Time, Place, and Action would seem irresponsible, yet the subject is so time-worn that we would pass over it as quickly as possible. Otherwise, see any handbook.

The Unities were taken seriously as rules only during the Neoclassical period (roughly the 17th and 18th centuries) and then primarily in France. Of the three, only the Unity of Action may seem to have important weight, and then only if it is defined (as it was not) as aesthetic coherence, which would allow the multiple plots of the Shakespearean drama so long as there is a satisfactory thematic interplay between them. The Unity of Time, apart from its very shaky Aristotelian foundations, seems to have derived from the "realistic" and quite false assumption that playing time and time within the play should be as nearly as possible equal. The circumstances and conventions of the theatrical illusion make anything possible in this regard. Unity of Place may be justified in an age of realistic stage sets on practical grounds but on no other.

All this is not to say that a playwright may not accept the Unities of Time and Place willingly as an artistic challenge; and it is worth noting that of our four modern plays, only Macbeth radically violates the Unities of Time and Place. As Voltaire never tired of pointing out, Shakespeare was quite hopeless in these matters.

## 5. Genres

Our discussions of the terms and conventions that enter into what we have called "thinking dramatically" are intended to help the student enter as deeply as possible into the craftsmanship of the literature of the theater, which requires giving equal emphasis to both terms--literature and theater. In turning to a consideration of a few (only a few) of the different sub-divisions, or Genres, of the Dramatic Mode, our ultimate intention of course remains the same; but the approach through genres has as its immediate purpose the creation of a more complete awareness of the great variety of creative possibilities inherent in each of the Modes and the preparation of the right set of expectations for a successful reading of any of the works we are to confront. It is most important, however, always to emphasize that "the right set of expectations" must include an understanding that few of the great representatives of the different kinds are "pure," and that more often than not the answer to the question, "What is it?" (first asked in our approaches to Roughing It and The Merchant of Venice), must be speculative and tentative. The play's the thing, not the pigeon-holing.

Our two great general categories are of course Tragedy and Comedy, the "two directions taken by Poetry," as Aristotle thought,

> according to the individual character of the writers. The graver spirits imitated noble actions, and the actions of good men. The more trivial sort imitated the actions of meaner persons, at first composing satires.

The division by writer-temperament now sounds silly (think of Shakespeare), and the Poetics fragment breaks off without the promised return to the subject of Comedy.

The treatment of Tragedy on the other hand is comprehensive, and it is convenient to follow Aristotle's lead in placing the primary emphasis on plot and character in trying to identify the distinguishing features of the genre.* The tragic plot is characterized by probability, enforced by the firm chain of causality which should bind its episodes together. Its hero should be "illustrious" and must be shown as having a power to choose among different courses of action; and it is not "vice or depravity" but "some error or frailty" which brings about his fall. The best tragic plot is one in which Recognition, "a change from ignorance to knowledge. . . is coincident with a Reversal of the situation, as in the Oedipus." It is to be noted that so far the terms of the definition are

*The King Oedipus "Teacher Version" provides a useful non-Aristotelian approach to tragic plot, as well as a summary of Aristotle's theory more detailed than this one.

"objective"--which is to say, generally verifiable. The concept of tragic catharsis or purgation introduces the subjective element of audience reaction, and, since subjective states cannot be clearly known, and since the treatment of the matter in the Poetics is cursory, the intended meaning is not clear. Do we leave the tragic theater "purged," and if so in what sense? Here every student may be encouraged to be his own Aristotle.

The King Oedipus, Julius Caesar, and Ghosts provide excellent occasions for discussions of tragic plot and character and the various ways in which the actual representatives of this Genre may seem to approximate and yet always in some way to differ from Aristotle's concept, which of course was based upon his own knowledge of Greek dramatic literature. Even the Oedipus, however, so greatly admired by the philosopher, will raise some questions about Aristotle's terms. Is it an "error or frailty" for a man to try to avoid a prophesied doom? Or is the "flaw" to be found in some other aspect of the hero's character? And what about the criterion of probability?* Some students may think that the story of Brutus approximates the concept more closely than the tragedy Aristotle actually had before him. Macbeth on the other hand may seem to call for a total revision of Aristotle's theory, to demand an entirely different view of tragic possibilities.

It may be appropriate to begin our discussion of Comedy with the suggestion that perhaps one reason for the solemn--indeed often heavy-handed--emphasis of so many of the writers on the comic spirit is that it has been necessary to overcome Aristotle's condescension ("the more trivial sort" indeed!), and to try to earn for the art born of and causing laughter a status equal to the art born of and causing pity and fear. There are of course sub-genres of Comedy such as Farce and Burlesque (analogous to Melodrama, the sub-genre of Tragedy) that have no purpose beyond the immediate one of sparking off the loud guffaw, and thank heaven (some sort of lower-case sub-heaven of course) for them. But there is a serious Comedy which is as clearly devoted to the exposure of human frailty as is Tragedy, or that probes as deeply into the obscure recesses of human nature. Sometimes, as in the case of Shakespeare's handling of Shylock and his tormentors, this is immediately apparent, and the elements of human cruelty and anguish in The Merchant show how close in its spirit and intention great Comedy may be to Tragedy.

Consider in this connection Faulkland in The Rivals. Both he and Lydia Languish are grotesques in that certain traits are so exaggerated in them that they seem monstrous caricatures of human nature. But whereas the target of the comic criticism in the case of Lydia seems to be simply a current literary fashion, Faulkland, as the "Teacher Version" points out, has his origin in the "neurotic self-doubter". His compulsive suspiciousness is monstrous--surely he is "sick" as we have learned to say; and Julia, if she has any concern for her own future

*See the discussion of both of these questions in the "Teacher Version" of the play.

happiness, is right not when she forgives him but when she rejects him. He is a comic descendant of Othello and could become dangerous. The difference of course is in the intention central to the Comic genre--Comedy creates deviants from an ideal human nature but in order to make us laugh at them; things must turn out all right in the end. Even Lydia has ancestors and descendants that may give us pause--keep us from disposing of her "mere" book-madness too contemptuously (may people today be unhinged by movies?). Behind her stands the lean figure of Don Quixote, whose end comes as close to inspiring the tragic feeling as comedy can be allowed to come. Ahead of her is the death-bed of poor silly Emma Bovary (Tom Sawyer is Lydia's comic grandson, transplanted).

Out of such considerations may come a clearer view of the rightness of Shakespeare in balancing so many of the Comedies on the edge of the tragic abyss (The Merchant of Venice, As You Like It), and in bringing so many of the tragedies so close at times to the comedy of the grotesque (the trick suicide of Gloucester in King Lear, the Hell-gate porter in Macbeth). His plays in their complexity defy simple typing and may force upon the ardent pigeon-holer lists longer than that of Polonius, which so quickly moves from simplicity to hyphenated complexity--"tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral." Yes..

For our purposes, however, it seems wiser to rely on broad categories; and within the general category called Comedy we may make a useful contrast between Shakespeare's Romantic Comedy and the later Comedy of Manners.*

Romantic Comedy as we find it in Shakespeare is characterized by extreme flexibility of structure: the dramatic idea dictates the form, as in the rhythmic interplay between the Rialto and Belmont in The Merchant (anticipating in practice the later Romantic theory of "organic form"). In complexity the Romantic-Comic character may suggest tragic characterization, and it is partly for this reason that we frequently may identify with some of the characters of a Romantic Comedy. Nearly all comedy involves a love-plot, but in Romantic Comedy, although we may be made to laugh or at least smile at the excesses of sentiment in the lover, we feel an underlying seriousness in the passion, and in the final union of the lovers the comic detachment often disappears. Poetry seems the natural medium for Romantic Comedy. Finally, in Romantic Comedy the social range of the cast of characters may be as extensive as the distance that separates the rustics from the Athenian court in A Midsummer Night's Dream; and the bumpkin is not simply a butt--who does not feel for while laughing at Bottom in his ass's head?

The Comedy of Manners of which The Rivals is generally characteristic is tightly structured, its concision, its formal clarity, usually emphasized by a fairly strict adherence to the unities of time and place as well as of action. By comparison with Romantic Comedy its social range is narrow, the characters drawn from a small segment of an aristocratic society and their servants; and the servants, like Fag and Lucy, in their wit and talent for intrigue are clearly of the same world as

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*Which is to be associated historically and stylistically with the Neo-classical Comedy of Molière and the English Restoration.

Captain Absolute and Lydia. Furthermore it is an urban aristocracy centered in London or in Bath that dominates the scene (contrast the Romantic pastoralism of As You Like It or A Midsummer Night's Dream), with the rural squire brought in chiefly for ridicule of his crude rustic manners. Characters tend to be flat, in contrast to the complexities of some Romantic characterization, and we are seldom forced to sympathize as we laugh. We are made to keep our distance. Our pleasure comes from the ingenuity of the plotting and the brilliant verbal wit of some of the characters and the unrelieved absurdity of others. Finally, in the love plot we seem hardly expected to "believe in" the genuineness of the passions which the characters seem rather to pretend to than to feel. There is no place in the Comedy of Manners for a Portia or a Miranda, and prose seems its natural medium.

6. The Shavian and Ibsenian "Mixtures"

Among the many ways in which The Rivals differs from Shakespeare's Romantic Comedy on the one hand and Shaw's plays on the other, an important one is in the significant fact that there is a marked personal distinctiveness in the plays of Shakespeare and Shaw, the traits of style and manner that make a personal signature and justify the adjectives "Shakespearian" and "Shavian," and that this kind of personal manner is not present in any obvious way in The Rivals or The School for Scandal, or in any of the parent comedies of the Restoration period, whose authors' names never achieved adjectival status. The kind of strong literary individualism that issues in the marked personal manner is usually associated with the Romantic tradition, with its insistent emphasis on originality and rule-breaking.

The Shavian manner, then, at least, makes Shaw a "Romantic," but never was there a Romantic with a more "realistic" eye for the truth of things. How indeed can we "type" Major Barbara? It has been called a "Discussion Play," but "discussion" doesn't tell us very much; and since the Combat in the Shavian drama is always a conflict of ideas and the play's plot seems designed to put ideas and not men to the test, Comedy of Ideas may seem a bit better. Even the stage settings--Salvation Army shelter vs. the Undershaft factory--are made to serve as symbols of ideas or idea-clusters and reflect the dramatic conflict; and the characters themselves, although they may at times move us (as in the moment perhaps of Barbara's disillusionment), are creatures whose most convincing feeling is intellectual passion. Undershaft is a man obsessed with his ruling idea, there is something akin to hysteria in his eloquence, he is beside himself; making us feel that the true high explosive in this play is a compound in which the important element is not nitric acid but ideas. And so, again, because of the frequency with which the characters themselves seem on the verge of blowing up, the Shavian Comedy of Ideas has on another count a strong affinity with the Romantic tradition.

By contrast, the Ibsenian drama would seem to associate itself with the modern tradition of Realism. The approach to Ghosts that emphasizes method and content, that is, may lead us to "Realistic Tragedy"

for it, "Romantic Tragedy" for Macbeth and King Lear and the others, paralleling the distinction we find between the Genres of Novel and Romance in the Narrative Mode. (Coming to Ibsen via Shaw might, of course, very reasonably suggest "Discussion Tragedy" or "Tragedy of Ideas" for Ghosts.)

But Ibsen like Shakespeare was a restless genius and his plays also resist any confident ultimate typing. His first plays, Brand and Peer Gynt, were verse dramas, and "Symbolic" or Romantic rather than Realistic in method and feeling. And one grows less and less satisfied with the word Realism as entirely appropriate to the "quintescence" of Ibsen's prose plays. It will do for the terms of a play like Ghosts perhaps. We see the characters, "living and moving before us" in that stodgy 19th century parlor, humdrum as our neighbors in appearance, people who have been speaking the prosiest prose all their lives and are seldom caught in heroic postures; and there is clear evidence that Ibsen wanted this play staged and directed with all possible fidelity to the realistic principle.

But as we read or watch the play unfold, we soon begin to feel reverberations issuing from scene as well as dialogue, suggesting meanings that transcend the literal surface of things and enrich the prose medium with haunting ambiguities. Those beautiful growing things, the flowers in the conservatory, associated first visually with Regina and then retrospectively with her mother and the first Alving seduction; but beyond the flowers and in symbolic contrast with them the "gloomy fjord landscape, shrouded in steady rain"--at the start of Act Two "A heavy mist still lies over the landscape." These physical contrasts strike the eye (the flower, sexual union, life, disease, gloom of death), while the dialogue plays on the contrast between spiritual darkness characterized by concealment and a desirable mental and spiritual illumination and openness.

When the first light symbol appears--"How dark it is here," Oswald has said; "All the times I've been home, I can't remember ever having seen the sun"--it is in the form of the artificial light of the oil lamp brought in by Regina. Then at the end of Act Two it is the dangerous glare of the orphanage fire, bringing the destruction of the institution intended to keep alive in benevolent memory the name of Chamberlain Alving, the source of the family disease. Gone now, "And not insured."

And how did it start? There is something strange, almost dream-like, about the way in which Manders reacts to Engstrand's accusation in the dialogue at the start of Act Three ("But nobody else down there touched the candles apart from you, Pastor." "Yes, so you say. But I honestly can't remember ever having a candle in my hand."). Engstrand is trying blackmail, but the handling of the matter hints at a cause or causes of the fire outside the realm of purely naturalistic causality. The orphanage had to burn, it was so fated. That other fire, the lamp, however, still burns on the table until, near the end, there are signs of the approaching dawn ("It's going to be fine, Oswald! In a little while you'll be able to see the sun."). The lamp is put out, and, after two or three theatrical hours of shrouding rain and mist, the great sun comes, the life-giver, and "The glacier and the mountain peaks in the background

gleam in the morning light."

Then Oswald asks for it; but it is Mrs. Alving who has it now, the full burning illumination of the total meaning of the Ghosts, the Erinnyes, of her fatal household, which she herself tried to confront intellectually ("--all kinds of old defunct theories, all sorts of old defunct beliefs--") with such proud and enlightened self-confidence in Act Two.

Thus Ibsen's creative amalgam of the real and the symbolic, which appears as a "coercion" of the very conventions of stage naturalism which he himself was such a powerful force in establishing.